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# Sexual Divisions of Labor in Export-Oriented Manufacturing Sectors: The Reconstruction of Gender and the Urbanization of Production in the Global South

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**Abstract**

The feminization of labor in parallel with the feminization of poverty in poor countries is a controversial topic in the field of development, especially with regards to foreign-owned export-oriented manufacturing sectors (FEMS). This paper offers a critique of the dominant argument that the introduction or expansion of a poor county's FEMS will positively affect the status of women, thereby stimulating sustainable human development. I argue that intersecting oppressions (i.e. female, poor, immigrant, rural, dark skinned) are exploited and exaggerated in order to achieve economic interests. International development groups such as the World Bank have labeled FEMS in poor countries as opportunities for women to increase their independent earning power and socioeconomic status. This is based on the logic that gender equality—a factor believed to stimulate development—is only achieved through access to the formal labor sector and independent capital earnings. However, this neglects the underlying fact that for FEMS to be economically sustainable, gender inequality, as well as global economic inequality, must remain unchanged. In addition to this critique, this paper attempts to answer the following questions: What are the different ways in which poor women in the Global South are impacted by the influx of export-oriented manufacturing industries? How is gender constructed and utilized within these industries' managerial policies? What are the ensuing effects of this on the labor force?

**Keywords:** Feminization of labor, manufacturing, industry, status of women, human development, gender equality.

## 1. Introduction

The feminization of labor in the export-oriented manufacturing sector is not a new topic; it is well documented and theorized. From economists to feminists to political scientists, many have already speculated on why foreign manufacturing firms favor female employees over male employees, and how these industries impact women's status. I intend to refute thargues position that a woman's political, social, and economic status rises as a poor country expands its export-oriented manufacturing sector. To refute this I will explore the relationship between globalization, export-oriented manufacturing sectors, and gender through the lens of intersectionality. The central questions I address are: What are the different ways in which poor women in the Global South are impacted by the influx of export-

oriented manufacturing industries? How is gender constructed and utilized within these industries' managerial policies? What are the ensuing effects of this on the labor force?

In the first section of the paper, I give an overview of the debate surrounding sexual divisions of labor and the feminization of export-oriented manufacturing sectors. In the second section, I detail the contrasting positions concerning the implications of the sexual division of labor within export-oriented production sectors using evidence from Leslie Salzinger's case study of the Maquiladoras along the U.S.-Mexico border as evidence. In the third section, I discuss and problematize top-down and bottom-up alternatives to the sweatshop model and the exploitative labor conditions faced by many women (and men) employed in export-oriented manufacturing sectors. I conclude with a critical analysis of the relationship between gender, globalization and export-oriented manufacturing sectors, and my attempt to answer the questions I have posed.

## 2. Part I

Divisions of labor, including sexual divisions of labor, traverse histories and cultures, though the characteristics of the divisions and modes of their enforcement are constantly fluctuating. There is not one universal sexual division of labor, nor is the 'modern' western division of labor, established in England during the Industrial Revolution, the only model for all historical and contemporary divisions of labor. As the globalization of trade and production expands in the form of foreign-owned manufacturing firms and export-processing zones (EPZs) in the global South, new systems of labor emerge. These new systems necessitate responsive new management strategies and institutionalized divisions of labor to maintain control over employees. The emphasis on export-oriented production has created prerogatives for firms to continue their former practices which often have discriminatory repercussions. Researchers across fields argue that, unlike domestic-oriented manufacturing sectors, the rapidly growing export-oriented manufacturing sectors have a greater incentive to create distinct and highly sexualized divisions of labor. Because the international market associated with globalization of trade and production has a much larger influence on export-production than on domestic, and the pressure of global competition is so intense, there is much stronger and ever-growing emphasis on cutting production costs. According to a study by political scientist, Michael Ross:

> Export-oriented firms produce goods for highly-competitive global markets, and wages constitute a large fraction of their production costs; this places them under exceptional pressure to seek out labor at the lowest costs. Since female wages are lower than male wages, export-oriented firms often target them for recruitment.[1]

Ross also acknowledges the characteristic rapid growth of these firms that requires a large and immediately available labor pool. Women can fill this space without displacing male laborers. Thus, women are ideal employees not only in low-wage positions, but also in the low-security, high turn-over-rate positions in export-production firms.

At the same time that foreign economic influences affect sexual divisions of labor, such divisions are social constructs, manufactured through the use of culturally and historically specific definitions of gender that shape normative ideas of labor. This reiterates the fact that there is not one universal sexual division of labor that can be compared cross-culturally or cross-nationally. Feminist scholar Chandra Talpade Mohanty elaborates on this idea, noting that feminist analysis may be just as vulnerable as other fields of study to oversimplification and homogenization:

> Concepts such as…the sexual division of labor…are often used without their specification in local culture and historical contexts. Feminists use these concepts in providing explanations for women's subordination, apparently assuming their universal applicability. For instance, how is it possible to refer to "the" sexual division of labor when the content of this division changes radically from one environment to the next and from one historical juncture to another?[2]

Despite the heterogeneity of the contexts of export-manufacturing sectors, due to local gendered constructs, the relative homogeneity of foreign firms and their management policies enable a limited space for cross-cultural and cross-regional comparison.

A distinguishing quality of this sexual division in labor is the intersectionality of globalization, gender, and global inequality. Typically, western-owned firms build export-manufacturing sectors on Southern soil and frame exploitative and discriminatory labor conditions as a response to local laws, economic stability, and social value systems. Firms and their hiring policies attribute female labor preference and sexual divisions of labor on shop floors to public narratives from the local communities about gender power relations, roles, and ideologies. By exploiting the economic global hierarchy that marginalizes the South and attributes to its societies' non-economic characteristics including gender inequality, a lack of human rights, and corrupt or incapable governments, foreign firms justify labor policies and conditions that would be prohibited by their own domestic labor laws. In particular, firms justify their sexist hiring practices by arguing that their actions benefit the female employees who suffer from their own unjust and sexist societies.

Firm preference for female labor is, however, more complicated than this. Within the discourse there are two distinct and opposing arguments: a formal economic position contrasted by a feminist, socio-economic critique. The former attributes female preference to the quality of work and level of skill required, while the latter recognizes the implications of this reasoning and the realities it disguises. This is elaborated on in the subsequent sections.

## 3. Part II

The most prevalent economic argument for female labor participation in export-oriented manufacturing sectors in poor countries rationalizes firm preference

as the economic pursuit of greater firm efficiency and profits. Furthermore, this argument suggests implications of western altruism in helping to liberate poor and oppressed women in the global South by moving them out of the private sector and into the public paid-labor sector. The rationale is constructed as follows: The tasks involved in this type of labor do not require great physical strength, meaning that men have no natural advantage over women in this area of work; Labor is considered 'low-skill', requiring very little training and no prior education, resources typically unavailable to poor women in the South; Tasks are often locally perceived as 'women's work', and so women's labor does not challenge local traditional patriarchal norms; Based on the 'nimble fingers' argument, female employees are inherently more suited for this type of detailed and repetitive work, and are also more docile towards management.[3]

This reasoning, however, frames the discussion predominantly in terms of what is favorable for female employees, while leaving out the incentives and benefits for the firms. With further examination, one can easily refute each of the aforementioned points. For example, the fact that men are not favored over women does not immediately imply that women should be so disproportionately favored over men. Rather, it implies that there should be no gender preference in hiring practices. The second position is also highly contentious, in that qualifying labor as 'low-skill' is disadvantageous for female employees. This strongly favors the firm which can justify low wages and decrease employee bargaining power as laborers have very low levels of human capital with which to bargain. Salzinger's analysis in the maquilas further discounts this explanation—that female employees (and potential employees) benefit from gendering the 'women's work'—by describing how the firm profits from the feminization of this labor sector. Salzinger states that, "to reframe the work as men's work would be to define it as underpaid. Faced with the choice between questioning maquila pay practices or the manliness of maquila workers, managers choose to question their subordinates." [4]By framing the work as feminine, it is not considered underpaid, as it would be if it were reframed as 'men's work.' Furthermore, the fact that women in these sectors are producing parts for televisions, cars, computers and nearly every product sold in wealthy countries worldwide rapidly disqualifies any argument that this labor might be locally perceived as 'traditional women's work.'[5]And lastly, the 'nimble fingers' argument that relies on patriarchal definitions of femininity is blatantly sexist and functions only to disguise the true incentives of the firm in favoring female labor: women's higher level of exploitability due to the gender wage gap, and their lower social status that often implies less political and legal representation and protection. These are only some among many weaknesses in the formal economic argument.

The underlying assumption behind female preference is the homogenization of women from the South in an effort to blur true firm prerogatives. If women were truly favored based on the superiority of their feminine qualities, the demographic of hired women would look much different. In the maquilas, the women are similar in several respects: they are poor, often single mothers or unmarried, the main bread-winners for their families, and without access to education. Some migrated to the maquilas specifically to work. While these characteristics may vary depending on the country or context, one thing remains consistent: manufacturers seek out the most vulnerable employees. Case studies from the maquilas show that when there are not enough women willing to work in these sectors, management responds by trucking

in women from peripheral areas that will work under the poor conditions, or by hiring men, while maintaining the work as 'feminine.'[6] If women are such ideal employees, why do firms not pay them higher wages, lobby for equal rights, or offer maternity protection? It is because firms benefit from women's economic and political inequality that provokes and maintains their relative vulnerability to the exploitative labor conditions. Thus, it is in the interests of foreign firms to maintain homogenous stereotypes of oppressed women living in patriarchal societies that do not allow them access to the formal wage-labor sector.

International development groups, including the World Bank and certain Gender and Development (GAD)–focused organizations, support development strategies that emphasize women's incorporation into the formal wage-labor economy in order to better their socio-economic positions. This is based on the notion that gender equality is necessarily achieved through access to this labor sector. Export-oriented manufacturing sectors in the global South are often targeted as vessels for this type of growth. However, a critical feminist response to this argues that the prerogative for women's increased socio-economic independence is only a mask for the reality of firms targeting cheap, easily exploitable labor. Women may not have the chance to change their socio-economic position before firms leave their communities in search of cheaper labor, or may even be worse off after working with the firm due to developed health problems and a lack of adequate health care.[7]

Based on the assumption that social and political emancipation is achieved by women's transition from the private to public labor sector, firms and researchers argue the following benefits for women: increased female school enrollment and literacy rates, increased social exposure and consequently, increased self confidence, the development of social networks, the practice of negotiating with men, and information-sharing with other women regarding health and contraception, and finally, increased female political influence.[8] This argument is strong in certain ways—it is undeniable that female literacy and school enrollment rates increase in correlation with increased female employment—and weak in others—many of these 'benefits' are only benefits if we assume that they were not already part of women's daily lives or that women would not have otherwise developed them without inclusion into the export-manufacturing sector. The factor that most weakens this argument, however, is the short duration that firms tend to remain in a community. As previously noted, competition in the global market provokes a constant search for cheaper labor. When the maquilas in Mexico were no longer competitive with lower Asian wages, factories vanished.[9] How quickly can we expect gender dynamics to change if firms are leaving after only several or even a couple years? Moreover, firms tend to leave when female workers begin to actively exercise their 'new' agency and demand better labor conditions, communicating a contradictory message to the purported goals and benefits of export-oriented manufacturing firms on female socio-economic status.

Salzinger's research in the maquiladoras offers a very different picture of gender relations provoked by the feminization of export-oriented manufacturing sectors from that discussed above. Salzinger argues that gender is 'manufactured' on the shop floor through the same process that Michel Foucault describes as the creation and maintenance of power relations in society: "The exercise of power is not a naked fact, an institutional right, nor a structure which holds out or is smashed: it is elaborated, transformed, organized; it endows itself with processes which are

more or less adjusted to the situation."[10] The sexualization of labor in this context does not confront the labor force to its face; it manifests in the hiring process, the administration, the discourse between both management and the shop floor, and between workers on the shop floor. Salzinger describes this practice, writing:

> The inextricable connections between hiring and labor control mean that the criteria by which workers are initially defined as hireable continue to function on the shop floor, as workers are addressed in production via the categories through which they were hired.[11]

Gender emerges in this context within the intersectionality of foreign prejudices about "Third World Women," indigenous women, migrants and other marginalized social classes, and how they can be treated. Gender is never created in isolation. While this gendering process is not imposed through force, Salzinger writes that it is systematic and institutionalized, apparent in the emphasis on controlling gender-normative conduct above production efficiency:

> The personnel department…is entirely focused on questions of appropriate appearance and behavior, rather than work itself…Behavior, attitude, demeanor—typically in highly gendered form—are evaluated here. Skill, speed, and quality rarely come up.[12]

Both on the shop floor and through the administration, patriarchal definitions of gender and labor function are "tools and technologies" based on Foucault's notion of establishing dialectic power relations.[13] These technologies function to legitimize management's control over female and male labor. While women are controlled through a set of gendered rules and expectations that include dress code, social interactions, sexual harassment and sexualized rules of conduct, men are controlled through the same gendered mechanisms, but with different expectations:

> In the factory, to be male is to have the right to look, to be a supervisor. Gender and class positions are discursively linked. Standing facing the line, eyes trained on his work, the male line-worker does not count as a man. In the plant's central game, he is neither subject nor object. As a result, he has no location from which to act—either in his relation to the women in the plant or in relation to factory managers.[14]

While men's role in the factory is very different, men and women are similarly exploited through the established labor patriarchy. As mentioned earlier, Salzinger points out that if this labor were reframed as 'men's work' it would be considered underpaid.[15] However, by framing it as 'women's work', both men and women can be paid less than they otherwise might, based on the devaluation of their labor as feminine.

## 4. Part III

Faced with the reality of labor conditions for both men and women working in these sectors in the South, we must move to create solutions that are both context-specific and broad enough to be easily reformed and reused in many

contexts. An intuitive response to this is the top-down approach that relies on international labor laws to protect workers. However, this is problematic for female labor in this industry for three reasons: First, if female laborers are successful in increasing their agency and political representation by lobbying for labor rights and regulations, they risk losing their preferential treatment by foreign firms because they are no longer the most vulnerable demographic for hire. As women begin to demand equal rights we may observe a problematic shift of preference towards other vulnerable demographics, such as child laborers. Second, if labor unions and collectives are able to lobby for more favorable work conditions for women, including social security, equal treatment and higher wages, firms will then have an incentive to leave the local community in search of more vulnerable, 'cheaper' labor. Third, the global scale on which these firms are functioning makes the search for ever-cheaper labor nearly infinite, while the accessibility and potential of adequate international labor laws appear nearly inaccessible at the local and individual levels. The inconsistency between domestic labor laws and the lack of labor regulations in most export-processing zones exemplifies the lack of adequate legal responses from the international community to the economic transformations of globalization and to the extremely creative strategies of global firms to avoid labor laws.

In response to the inadequacies of multinational top-down approaches to these issues, the women and men who are, or have been, employed in these sectors have already begun to create their own alternatives. Women and men in the maquiladora industry and across the border in Los Angeles sweatshops, have a successful history of bottom-up labor organizing. Some may argue that this political and collective action is one of the benefits of exposure to the formal wage labor force. However, this ignores the long history in Mexico and throughout Latin America of collective political action among both men and women. Today, groups are utilizing the newly available tools of the globalization of technology and communication to transnationally organize and build political alliances in the U.S. to lobby for change. For example, some activist groups use multimedia tools to reach mainstream global audiences by recording their realities in documentary form, thus increasing their transnational support. These strategies are sustainable, contagious and can be applied in many contexts, and their successes are many. While certain tactics are context-specific, the tools, foundations and provocations are general, requiring only minimal adaptation in other regions. Thus, while the notion of globalization seems to diminish the power of the 'local,' we see here that it is in fact the 'local' that is making the greatest changes in how global society will react to the effects of globalization.

The concept of globalization is vague and its dimensional plurality outnumbers its numerous definitions. In a report by the UN's Research Institute for Social Development, 'globalization' is defined as referring to the "accelerated increase in international economic relations in the recent period, usually associated with greater economic liberalization, both internationally as well as within national economies, that has taken place since the 1980s."[16] In contrast to this, Fenneke Reysoo quotes an article from Kalb, et al. offering "the idea that the process and outcomes of globalization depend on social power relationships, local development paths, territorially engraved social institutions and the nature of possible action within social networks."[17] The latter description allows for a much broader and humanizing image of globalization that is more aligned with the efforts of women's

transnational labor-rights organizations. Faced with a lack of international legal protection and action, if labor conditions are to improve, workers and activists must take initiative by mobilizing collectively to target firms and CEOs on a human level. In the campaign film, "Made in L.A.," factory workers do this by protesting in front of the homes of business owners linked to sweatshop exploitation. This creates a space for activism that is human and personal. These women and men are not commodities to be used and disposed of by the global market, nor are these transnational firms without a human face and the ability to feel shame. Weaknesses in transnational legal action allow individuals to desert their crimes across borders, but the individual victims and activists who defend them have the opportunity to confront those responsible and demand change.

## 5. Conclusion

Globalization is not the problem here, nor is the presence of a sexual division of labor between men and women. Export-oriented manufacturing sectors in poor countries are not the problem either. What creates the exploitative labor conditions outlined here is the combination of these three factors, complimented by the omnipresence of patriarchal definitions of gender, ethnocentric perceptions of a central dominate North and a peripheral exploitable South, and the influx of an extreme form of capitalism that feeds on greed. In order to ensure fair labor regulations that are sustainable and case-appropriate, spaces for discourse between employers, employees and stakeholders must be ensured, supported and rewarded by international oversight bodies and political actors. Furthermore, if development institutions such as the World Bank are serious about prioritizing female labor force participation in order to improve gender equality, and commit to doing so without relying on exploitative and sexist labor conditions, research must be supported to determine comparative advantages of female labor forces in different countries. If foreign manufacturing firms can be convinced that hiring women and paying them equal salaries with equal benefits will increase their productivity and marginal returns, fair labor rights will not have to come at the expense of job losses for women.

These are only a few of the numerous alternatives to an exploitative globalized labor system based on gender and economic inequality. Arguing that unequal labor standards, or the denial of equal rights are the only way to achieve gains for women is both counter-intuitive and shortsighted. With only a bit more thought and creativity, progressive and fair solutions become easily attainable, and will undoubtedly prove to be much more sustainable in the long run.

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## Endnotes

[1] Ross, M. (2008) p. 108

[2] Mohanty. (2004) p. 268

[3] Salzinger, L. (2003) p.108

[4] Ibid, (1997) p. 560

[5] Ibid.: Funari, (2006)

[6] Salzinger, L. (1197) p. 551

[7] Funari. (2006)

[8] Ross, M. (2008) p. 107-8

[9] Funari. (2006)

[10] Foucault (1982) p. 224

[11] Salzinger, L. (2003) p. 9

[12] Ibid. (1997) p. 555

[13] Foucault's Theories on "Technologies of Power" and "Technologies of Self"

[14] Salzinger (1997) p. 560

[15] Ibid. p. 560

[16] S., Jomo K. (2001) p. 27

[17] Reysoo. (2005) p. 125